



Making the Most of Outdoor Time with Preschool Children

Think back to your childhood. What did you enjoy most when you played outdoors? Maybe you made messy mud pies by the creekbed, swung on a vine, or played hide-and-seek among the willow trees. Together, play and the outdoors uniquely contribute to learning in young children.

Therefore, it is critical to look at the entire child care environment where children learn, play, and grow. This includes not only the classroom inside, but also the outdoor space. Although the field of early childhood education has defined quality in child care settings, it has given the greatest attention to indoor space, group size, teacher qualifications, and using developmentally appropriate practices with young children. Now it is time to turn our attention to the world of learning opportunities waiting outdoors.

Recent work (DeBord, Moore, Hestenes, Cosco, and McGinnis, 2002) describes five domains for consideration when planning outdoor play and learning spaces for young children. These domains include the physical outdoor environment, interactions, play and learning settings, program, and teacher/caregiver role.

Physical Outdoor Environment

The physical outdoor environment provides a special stage for action and can stimulate children's play, learning, and physical activity. The environment includes both the context of the outdoor play area and how the child care building and play space sit on the lot. Outdoor spaces, however, must be designed in a way that allows children to take safe risks while testing their emerging abilities. A safe, well-planned environment provides opportunities for children to seek new challenges as they master old ones.

Natural play spaces can stimulate children's imaginations and engage their sense of curiosity as they explore their physical surroundings and learn in ways beyond what they can experience indoors.

Often child care programs are located in space that was designed neither for a child care program nor for outdoor learning. Certainly some barriers exist that prohibit teachers from making major changes, but envisioning an evolution of the space is critical. Changes cannot occur overnight, but certainly incremental change can be incorporated into a long-range plan.

A few factors should be considered when evaluating the space for the outdoor learning areas. Consider these questions:

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